

REFLECTING ON THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHELSEA EMERGING FROM RECEIVERSHIP

A Message for the Community from Jay Ash, City Manager of Chelsea

As he peered down the hallway from his office on his very first day to the City Council Chambers, newly appointed City Manager Guy Santagate knew what one of the biggest challenges would be in managing Chelsea under a new form of government. It was August 18, 1995, and Chelsea had just emerged from nearly four-years of State ordered Receivership. During a time akin to “radical treatment for the most severe of illness,” two receivers began the process of transforming a municipal government that had more than its fair share of notoriety. But that was under near-dictatorial powers, when the receivers had only to answer to the governor, not the local electorate, and certainly not Chelsea’s elected officials. Manager Santagate had to wonder if the return to democracy would inhibit the professional management that the new City Charter sought for the City.

Time and again he would recalled the potential obstacle to me. As important as finances, public safety or any of the seemingly endless myriad of municipal management issues could be, to Guy, the real question about the City’s future was whether this once hotbed of political chicanery could accept that municipal government would be led by an appointed, not elected official. More so, though, was his underlying concern that the pressures of political influence, which arguably thrust the City into Receivership in the first place, would rise up and hinder or, worse yet, end the reform movement that was so vitally necessary for the City to overcome its dysfunctional past.

Of course, Santagate had every right to be concerned about an “old boy network” trying to bring back the past for the benefit of the connected few. Back in the 1960’s, a starry-eyed twenty-something year old ran for mayor as a reformer and even finished first in the mayoral primary. But once word spread to the barrooms and backrooms that patronage and influence were about to come to an end with the election of the young maverick, the old boy network rose up and soundly defeated then Alderman Guy Santagate. Some thirty years later, with three decades of watching his beloved City “sold down the river,” Santagate knew as he finally entered the Chief Executive’s Office as its official occupant that any slip back to the past could and would doom Chelsea yet again.

Fast-forwarding to today, Santagate’s fears have not materialized, and the City is all the better for it. Not that patronage and influence have not tried to creep back into City Hall from time to time, because it has. Each and every time, though, it has been beaten back. No, the lack of politics and resulting flourishing of professionalism owes its championing to, ironically, the City’s elected officials.

Those very sources of concern from yesteryear, whose natural tendencies would be to press for access and favoritism, have instead acted most apolitically in putting the good of the community ahead of any self-interest or political motives. The City Council's thirst for a better Chelsea has resulted in a strict adherence to one of the most professionally progressive charters in the state, and a collective ability to strike a balance between leading and supporting. It is no wonder that through the Council's watchful eye and focused directive, the last ten years in Chelsea's history have been among the best in anyone's memory.

Rhetoric aside, ample evidence exists to support such a bold claim that City government has worked well this past decade, and the entire community, not just a politically connect few, has been the beneficiary. On the finance side, there's increased bond ratings, budgeting and auditing awards, and the maintenance of "rainy day funds." While local governments are still reeling from the worst municipal finance period since the Great Depression, Chelsea has managed to navigate through the turbulent times and is regularly pointed to as a role model for efficient and effective municipal management. That's a far cry from the infamy Chelsea suffered during a relatively mild recession that thrust the City into Receivership in 1991. As Springfield struggles with its own fiscal and political mess, and other communities have been placed on the brink of bankruptcy as a result of local aid reductions and the fallout from bad economic times, this City's finances have remained relatively stable. Yes, there are budgetary pressures and tough decisions that have and will continue to be made. However, the feelings of an inescapable slide downwards and an inevitable collapse which existed in the late 1980's has been replaced with a sense of control and a realistic hope for even better days ahead.

For most residents, the tremendous leadership of the City Council and the relative strength of the City's finances are not matters that they notice daily. Instead, a drive around the City and a gaze at all that has taken place since the City emerged from Receivership in 1995 provides the more visible indication that Chelsea has indeed had a fruitful decade. New schools opened in 1996, the first to do so in eighty years! Other facilities for youth and their families, including the Roca Pallin Youth Center, the Jordan Boys & Girls Club and the CAPIC Head Start Center, give the community unparalleled resources. Two new parks have been added and every existing park has been upgraded, including the placement of the artificial turf at Chelsea Memorial Stadium. That project has been the envy of many other communities.

Streets, sidewalks, and those unseen yet vital underground water, sewer and drain lines have been substantially upgraded. As recently as the mid-1990's, antiquated infrastructure, including wooden pipes, placed the City's entire utility system in jeopardy. The regular, routine replacement of infrastructure

through a sound capital improvement program has worked here and been the basis for similar programming in other communities.

Perhaps most notably, Chelsea's skyline has changed. The Everett Avenue Urban Renewal District Project, announced in 1997, has transformed a once blighted industrial area and has been the springboard for more than \$100,000,000 of private investment since then. When I first started the City's economic development program in 1996, I had to beg and plead to get anyone to consider investing anything, including just time, in Chelsea. Now, dozens of successful projects latter, Chelsea has become such an appreciated locale that one of the *world's* largest companies has been talking with me about several potential projects they would like to undertake here. Parkway Plaza is under construction and the Mystic Mall will be filing redevelopment plans within the next four weeks.

Values in local neighborhoods have skyrocketed. By one account, the appreciation of residential property in Chelsea has exceeded *all* other communities over a four-year period. That's a remarkable story when one remembers more that 100 vacant and boarded up units that existed in our neighborhoods in 1995. Do you remember the burned-out YMHA or the Skeleton Building? Both scourges of their neighborhoods for more than a decade and both examples of how the City's attention to problem properties has resulted in the elimination of buildings and businesses that dragged down neighborhoods. At the site of the Skeleton Building on Eden Street, for example, the three-story, steel-framed reminder of the failed promises of previous rejuvenation efforts has been replaced by seven units of neighborhood appropriate housing, and a terrific neighborhood park.

Is everything perfect? No, it isn't. Skyrocketing values have placed pressures on affordability, urban issues are abounding and finances remain tight. Yet, for those who can remember the past and look critically at the present, Chelsea's future seems as bright as it has been in my lifetime. That impression is a result of the outstanding leadership of a dedicated City Council, the continuing contributions of the best City staff I have ever seen, and the work that many in the community are doing to promote a single, pro-Chelsea agenda. The business community, community-based non-profits, civic organizations and individual residents have been welcomed to an open City government and are all part of what has made Chelsea so successful over the past ten years. Collectively, they are among the many reasons that those problems that still exist will be addressed; not shied away from as had been the City's inking in years gone by. This is one of the reasons that the National Civic League selected Chelsea to receive the prestigious "All-America City" designation in 1998.

A decade is a very short period, especially in the life of a community that was settled almost four hundred years ago. What impresses me the most about where we are heading, though, is that we are not repeating the mistakes of the past, and remain committed to addressing our needs in a professional and methodical manner well into the future. Counter to the old axiom: "you can't teach an old dog new tricks," today's Chelsea has managed to find a new way to operate. With ten years of experience behind us, if we can continue to build on the reasonable and rational debate and the resulting actions that have already produced award-winning results, there is no end to the success we can enjoy.

Today and every day, I walk out that same door that City Manager Santagate walked out of on his first day. As I look down the hall at the Council Chambers, I often reflect on how the City Council has made a huge difference in nurturing and encouraging our relatively new form of government. The spirit of cooperation that exists between the City's appointed and elected officials, on the whole, is really unprecedented, both here and around municipal governments elsewhere. That relationship is the foundation for all else that can happen. It does not guarantee success, for there are many other variables that are in play. However, I can almost guarantee that the weakening of the relationship or a return to the "who you know" days of running municipal government would make the job of promoting a professionally managed government all the more difficult.

It is human nature to long for the "good old days." To paraphrase one of the heroes in Chelsea's metamorphosis, Guy Santagate, "I don't remember the old days being so good that I would want them back." For me, the only reason to look backwards is to make sure that the past is even more distant from the present. Chelsea's future is in working together to reach more and more of the potential many of us have longed believed existed. I would respectfully suggest that the last decade does indicate that great accomplishments can be achieved in Chelsea. I am pleased to share the mantle of responsibility to achieve those accomplishments with many community partners, including a City Council whose altruism continues to make all else possible.